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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000016

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TAGS: IR PREL

SUBJECT: REACTION TO LARIJANI'S PROPOSAL FOR IRAN-GULF ALLIANCE

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: At the 2006 Arab Strategy Forum in Dubai, Iranian National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani delivered a speech calculated to create doubt in the minds of Arab leaders about the value of their relationship with the US, and to present Iran as a more attractive ally. Larijani called for US withdrawal from Iraq and made other key points: 1) Iran is not a threat to the region, rather its most effective leader; 2) Arab countries should join with Iran to seek regional solutions for regional security problems, rather than relying on the US; 3) US attempts at blocking Iran's nuclear program will be a precedent for blocking programs in Arab countries. Underlying Larijani's comments was the idea that Iran is a more appropriate ally and leader for the Middle East region than the US because Iran shares a common Muslim heritage with its Arab neighbors. Iran has made this pitch before, but Larijani's comments mark an unusually direct overture to the Arab world. Contacts report, however, that Iran is unlikely to win converts. That said, we should continue to emphasize with our Arab partners the benefits of alliance with the US versus Iran, as well as give long-term assurances that any eventual change in the relationship between US and Iran would not come at their expense. To counter Ahmadinejad's street appeal, we should continue to point out that Iran does not offer a positive vision for the region, only a negative one. End Summary

Larijani's Key Points

2.(C) According to press reports and reports from spectators, Larijani made three key points in his December 5 speech at the Arab Strategy Forum, under the auspices of UAE Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum (MbR). The annual conference brings together prominent leaders, business executives, and scholars to discuss political and economic strategies for the Middle East.

-- Iran is not a threat to the region. Instead Iran can be the region's most effective leader. "Some countries consider Iran a threat to the region, forgetting about Israel," Larijani said. He later insisted, "We are not after a nuclear bomb." At the same time, he called for withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Larijani's remarks are part of a concerted effort to press for

Iranian leadership of the region, at the same time reiterating common criticisms of the US and Israel.

-- Arab countries should join Iran in security cooperation, and regional security problems should be resolved by the region without outside help. "The security and stability of the region needs to be attained and we should do it inside the region, not through bringing in foreign forces...We should stand on our own feet," he said. The remarks were designed to make Arab leaders question the nature of their relationships with the US. He continued, "We don't accept the relationship between the US and the countries of the region. If you talk to Arab leaders here, you can sense that they aren't happy with the current situation. They feel the Americans are bullies. They don't want the US Ambassador ordering them around."

-- If the US succeeds at constraining Iran's nuclear program, Arab countries will be vulnerable to the same pressure. Were Iran to abandon its enrichment program and agree to import its nuclear fuel, a precedent would be set and similar restrictions would be placed on the potential nuclear programs of Arab nations. "They will allow you to have a power plant, but they will keep the fuel," he said. Underlying Larijani's comments was the idea that Iran is a more appropriate ally and leader for the Middle East region than the US because Iran shares a common Muslim heritage with its Arab neighbors.

Iran's Regional Focus in Foreign Policy

3.(C) Since the election of President Ahmadinejad, Iranian foreign policy has shifted a great deal of its focus away from relations with Western countries and toward the Muslim world, particularly its Arab neighbors. Iran has sent a constant stream of envoys to Gulf states in an attempt to allay the fears of Gulf leaders concerning Iran's nuclear program, and to press those countries to reject US influence and cooperate more with Iran on various political and economic issues. At a late October meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the

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Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini proposed the formation of a regional security pact, saying that US Middle East policy is not in the interests of the region. "It is a US policy to create tensions in the region. Iran's response will be rational and wise," Hosseini said, adding that "active cooperation among the PGCC [Note: Iranians refer to the GCC as the "Persian" Gulf Cooperation Council. Endnote.] states will be the best way to reinforce security in the region." Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar reiterated the proposal in November, saying that Iran's policies are based on respect and good-neighboringliness. Frequent diplomatic visits to Gulf states by Iranian envoys, and a series of recent comments by senior Iranian officials promoting a regional security arrangement indicate a renewed effort toward Iran's goal of regional leadership.

Message Appears Not to Resonate

4.(C) Analysts and observers commented that Larijani's message garnered a lot of attention but appeared not to resonate with its intended audience. The speech reportedly sparked a great deal of discussion later, with some conference attendees calling it "extraordinary," but nonetheless, it received only polite applause. A journalist who attended the event told IRPOffs that Saudis and Emiratis later commented to him that they were not moved by the appeal, saying they felt closer to the Americans, who offer them technology and education, than to the Iranians, who offer them nothing. A regional security analyst at a local think tank separately commented that Iran's message urging security cooperation is nothing new and has no resonance in the region, particularly with Iran's new government and in view of its interventionist policies regarding Iraq and Lebanon. The analyst dismissed as ineffective Iran's tactic of asserting that nuclear restrictions on Iran will extend to the region, saying

that Gulf states do not view the Iranian nuclear case as a valid test case for them, given their strong suspicions that Iran has the intention to build a nuclear weapon.

5.(C) Embassy DCM subsequently spoke to MFA Acting U/S Tariq Al Haidan for his reaction to Larijani's speech. Al Haidan limited his remarks to saying that the Iranians are "talking a lot on this subject but that you (the US) shouldn't worry about it," implying that the UAE was not taking seriously Tehran's call to eject the US from its bases here.

6.(SBU) There has been scant media reaction to Larijani's speech in the local Arabic press, other than reprinting some of the Western reports. Reporting on the Iraq Study Group's report is dominating the Arabic press. Iranian press reported Larijani's speech with little commentary, although one outlet, Fars News, called Larijani's regional security proposal "audacious" and "the strongest sign yet of Iran's rising assertiveness in its contest with the United States for influence in the region."

7.(C) Comment: Iran's efforts to date to forge a new regional security arrangement and decrease US presence in the region appear have gotten little traction with GCC governments and are unlikely to do so in the future. This does not mean, however, that countries in the region - particularly Gulf states - feel they can ignore or alienate their large Persian neighbor. At the governmental level, Gulf allies like the UAE will likely try to continue their balancing act between maintaining restrained but economically beneficial ties to Iran, while preserving close links to the US. The USG advances its interests by continuing to emphasize to Arab governments the benefits of alliance with the US, in contrast to the lack of benefits offered by Iran. Arab countries also need assurance that in the long-term, any future change to US-Iran relations will not come at their expense, either politically or economically. In contrast, the view from the "street" is different from that of Arab governments. President Ahmadinejad has gained some popularity on the regional "street" by manipulating and amplifying anti-American and anti-Israel sentiments. While Iran may tap into regional discontent with US policies and culture, it has not offered a credible and attractive alternative in its place, a point we can continue to emphasize in our public statements.

This message was cleared by Embassy Abu Dhabi.
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